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ABSTRACT

The mission of the two-year college is complex, controversial, and frought with internal contradictions. From the start, the two-year college has existed outside the mainstream of higher education, deemed neither serious nor selective with a curriculum paralleling the high school rather than the four-year college. Efforts to enhance the position of the community college through curriculum reform will need to take into account key ways in which community colleges differ from four-year colleges. First, community colleges tend to enroll large percentages of low-income and minority college students. Second, community colleges tend to be urban institutions, with closer links to the surrounding community than most four-year institutions. Third, community colleges were designed as commuter rather than residential colleges. And finally, the central mission of the community college has shifted from liberal education to career education. In light of these distinguishing characteristics, efforts at curriculum reform should use the liberal arts and sciences to: (1) examine the class, racial, ethnicity, general, and urban issues that will play pivotal roles in shaping students' futures; (2) enrich and enliven the mastery of basic skills while preparing students for college-level courses; (3) break down the perceived dichotomy between liberal arts and business curricula; and (4) enhance the academic quality of life for the commuting student and the community. Educators must insist on using the liberal arts to extend opportunities for social mobility and personal development to students who need remediation, who want careers, and who dream of equality. (MDB)

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The Community College Mission
Access or Anarchy?

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The Community College Mission: Access or Anarchy?

The crisis of identity that faces higher education today is nowhere more evident than in the two-year colleges. Even the phrase, two-year colleges, is carefully chosen to include all institutions--the 20% private Junior Colleges and the vast majority of public Community Colleges. The confusion of name reflects a pervasive confusion of purposes and priorities. Most two-year institutions would agree that their objective is to provide access, but the foremost writers on the subject, Arthur Cohen and Florence Brauer, lead us in asking "Access to What?"[1] The answer is as multifaceted as the problem. Two-year colleges claim to provide access to four-year colleges, to jobs, to lifelong learning, to compensatory education, to community enrichment, and, last but not least, to individual self-growth. They are, according to the Dutchess Community College catalogue, dedicated to "quality, opportunity, diversity, and social responsibility." Or, as the Community College of the Finger Lakes put it more succinctly, these are institutions of higher education that offer "something for everyone." Because the purposes of the two-year colleges border on chaos, they have made a virtue out of a necessity and styled themselves as comprehensive institutions serving all men but knowing no master. Today many people are asking whether or not the modern two-year college is so ambitious as to be

counter-productive. Has it allowed its diversity to displace its integrity and has it shortchanged its students in the process? Before designing new core curricula, it might be useful to reassess existing curricula in historical context precisely because the two-year college mission is so complex, so controversial, and so fraught with internal contradictions.

The first question that all two-year colleges must ask is whether or not they are really colleges. This is a particularly important, albeit painful, issue because many people would definitely answer "No." From the start, the two-year colleges have been outside the mainstream of higher education and in some important ways they still are. Although the first two-year college was founded in Jolliet, Illinois in 1901, the two-year college movement received its initial impetus from a 1907 California state enactment that mandated the establishment of schools for the thirteenth and fourteenth years. These new institutions were to be located in or near high schools in order to reach students who lacked either the ability or the inclination to complete college. At the same time, there was strong sentiment among some of the more prominent four-year colleges such as Stanford, the University of Chicago, and the University of Michigan that the first two years should be split off from the last two years in keeping with the German model of the University that was so influential at the time. For these men, the objective was to relieve the university of the burden of teaching the less sophisticated students and to sift them out of academia before they reached the upper division.[2]

As they came upon the educational scene, two-year colleges were associated with students deemed inferior and purposes considered marginal to higher education. They were neither serious nor selective and were therefore quite suspect as educational institutions. The rise of remedial programs has compounded the problem by magnifying the role of the two-year college as an extension of high school. Reflecting a general perception, the Carnegie Commission observed in its 1970 report on the Open Door Colleges that the Community College curriculum paralleled, not the four-year college, but the high school with its tracking of students into occupational, general, and academic programs. This legacy has plagued the two-year college throughout its history.

The modern two-year college remains the stepchild of higher education precisely because it tries to be more than high school and yet is considered less than college. By virtue of its role as an alternative institution, it has never been a fully legitimate institution. In fact, some observers have suggested that attending a community college is a liability rather than an asset for those who seek real access and opportunity. It is a sobering thought that students of comparable ability are two to three times as likely to drop out if they attend a two-year instead of a four-year college. The first priority for curricular reform, then, is that the two-year colleges carefully consider what it is that distinguishes them from high schools and how they can avoid making any more "false promises" to their students.[3]

On the surface, the two-year colleges are the biggest educational success story ever. Legitimized by the Truman Commission's 1947 Report on Higher Education for American Democracy and spurred on by the 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education, the two-year college has become the by-word for open education and local education. In the past twenty years their numbers have doubled and their enrollments have quadrupled. At one point community colleges were being created at the rate of about one a week. Their growth has been so phenomenal that today full fifty percent of all undergraduates are in two-year colleges. If nothing else, the two-year colleges are access institutions simply because they are the point of entry for such a large proportion of our college population, and that is one good reason why the two-year colleges must reconsider what they are doing and why they are doing it.[4]

Another set of statistics makes the challenge even greater. The two-year college student is poorer and darker than the typical four-year college student. Astin's research data indicates that the average parental income of the two-year college student is significantly lower than that of the four-year college student which, in turn, means that the former group must earn while they learn. As part-time students they are further differentiated from the traditional full-time college students. The percentage of minorities in the two-year colleges is high. Fifty percent of all black college students

and 43% of all Hispanic college students are in the two-year colleges. A third "outgroup" that is overly represented in the two-year institutions is women who account for over 50% of the two-year college population. Put together with the income and ethnic statistics, this data indicates that many two-year college students have the triple disadvantage of being poor, female and non-white. In the best sense of the term, then, the two-year colleges are genuinely "people's colleges" where the nation's commitment to democracy and equal opportunity is being tested for its sincerity. Curriculum reform proposals should address the demographic realities of the students. While equipping them with the skills and knowledge that define equal education, we must also equip them with an understanding of the class, race, ethnicity, and gender issues that will shape their life choices.[5]

Although Junior Colleges can be found in a variety of settings, community colleges tend to be urban institutions. They are inner city versions of the nineteenth century land grant colleges that were intended to serve the rural, poor, white high school graduate with what was considered to be an appropriately technical education. The comprehensive Community College was designed to go the last mile in making higher education available to all, either on or off campus, not just in the city but also in the community. This aspect of the Community College mission is in striking contrast to the traditional American college nestled on an idyllic campus in a pastoral setting. Safely separated from the real world,

the idea was to enable the best minds to pursue great thoughts literally in ivy-covered towers.[6]

Even today our most prestigious colleges remain outside the city. When they find themselves surrounded by encroaching urbanism, they protect their quads with brick walls and imposing metal fences. Despite the fact that the Wisconsin idea of college service to the community has existed since the Progressive era, the typical college often remains distinct from its community. Town and gown tensions, partly derived from the college's status as a tax-free realtor, belie the apperance of comaraderie promoted by a few concerts, a lecture series, or a token clinic. Not surprisingly, it was to the two-year colleges that society turned when it really wanted some branch of higher education to reach out to the community. Hence, the name community college which, in itself, reveals a shift of emphasis away from the pure pursuit of knowledge. Hence, also, the emphasis on establishing these institutions within commuting distance of every American which determined that they be further distinguished from most colleges by not being residential. In its demography as well as its location, the community college remains outside the mainstream of higher education in America. It should, however, be proud of this role and take its community outreach mission seriously enough to incorporate the study of urban issues into its curriculum.[7]

The growth of the two-year college has paralleled the rise of career education in the United States and the vocational mission has become the central mission for the

two-year college. Although vocational education was not a new idea, it was given new life in the sixties with the passage of federal legislation for vocational education in 1963 and 1968. These were among the first Congressional bills to officially acknowledge that Junior and Community colleges warranted inclusion as part of federal funding formulae for higher education. The two-year colleges had officially come of age precisely at the time when career education was becoming the vehicle for democratic education. The objective was to make the people's college a pragmatic college and, as former president of Staten Island Community College, William M. Birenbaum, explained, to make "the vital connection between advanced education and economic survival."[8]

In a sense, colleges have always been vocational. However, it was always the liberal arts that formed the foundation on which professional education was built. The two-year colleges have experienced a major shift whereby career education has gradually displaced liberal education creating many of the problems we face today. Ernest Boyer has pointed out that the four-year colleges face a similar dilemma but it is epitomized by the two-year colleges. The shift has been reflected in changing patterns of student majors. In 1965 only 13% of two-year college students were enrolled in occupational majors but by 1980 the figure was over 62% and in some schools it is as high as 90%. Many people considered vocational education successful when students got jobs in the field for which they trained. Certainly, that is what the students seemed to want, at least in short range terms.[9]

Other observers have criticized career education for undermining the students' long-range dreams. Jerome Karabel and Fred Pincus contended that career education in the two-year colleges was really "class-based tracking" that limited rather than enhanced social mobility. By preparing students for middle-level jobs, career education gave the appearance of social mobility for the poor even though the jobs were acknowledged by the federal government to be sub-professional and "career ladders for those occupations [were] almost non-existent." Instead of serving as, what Jencks and Reisman called, "the great leveller," education seemed to reinforce class distinctions. To make matters worse, without a liberal arts foundation, the two-year colleges were providing what L. Stephen Zwerling, Stanley Aronowitz, and Ira Shor labeled second rate, bargain basement education that would not wear well with time. They echoed the suggestion made by Burton Clark in 1960 that the two-year colleges were simply strategies for "cooling out" the aspiring working classes. Channeling them into jobs for which a market demand existed not only met the needs of the employers but also kept the students from challenging the closed market, status-laden professions that remained reserved for the elite. Whether or not we fully accept these ideas, they compel us to reconsider the predominance of career education in the two-year colleges.[10]

If it is true that career education without liberal education is dead-end education then, clearly, we must try to restore some balance to the curriculum for our students' sake, if not for our own sake. The objective probably should not be to eliminate career education but to broaden its base in order to diversify the student's options. Consequently, curriculum reform should forge a new link between career education and liberal education, one that will enable students to better understand the dynamics of employment and unemployment in a highly stratified, post-industrial economy; one that will place work in a broader context as part of a larger human endeavor to survive, to create, and, hopefully, to advance.

If not downright disturbing, the analysis of the socioeconomic limitations of career education has provoked widespread concern about the transfer mission of the two-year colleges, which was, after all, their primary mission until the 1970s. It is significant that the transfer role is often referred to as the "collegiate function" and that two-year schools speak of "college parallel" programs, and "college transfer" students. The implication, of course, is that all other aspects of two-year college education are neither college-level nor college quality. Their mission may be non-traditional, but the two-year colleges are the gateway to traditional education and therefore have to acknowledge the traditional standards of traditional academia. The problem they have to solve is how to be responsive and

pragmatic within the conventional context of higher education or forever stay outside its doors.[11]

Today, the AA and the AAS degrees have little academic validity and the students themselves seem to understand the importance of obtaining baccalaureate degrees. Although the transfer rate has plummeted since the 1950s, 75% of entering full-time urban community college students aspire to transfer and earn the BA degree. Studies in California and New York indicate that increasing numbers of AAS students are actually transferring. Both of these facts are sobering. On the one hand, they suggest that the old distinction between terminal and transfer students is irrelevant. On the other hand, they suggest that the two-year colleges need to improve transfer opportunities for all students. In particular, Allison Bernstein of the Ford Foundation, has suggested that the two-year colleges need to be more supportive of their students' interest in transfer and need to prepare them better by shifting the pedagogical emphasis away from the mastery of skills towards the development of critical analysis and the exploration of self.[12]

Richardson and Bender have also suggested that the quality of education in the two-year colleges be improved. For the student requiring remediation, they offer transitional courses that would coordinate the teaching of introductory level content courses with skills reinforcement through an increased number of contact hours. For all students, they recommend the establishment of honors programs that would at

once promote and reward academic excellence. Another strategy is Alexander Astin's idea of a "transfer-college-within-a-college" where students who aspire to a BA would get an intensive curricular and extracurricular experience similar to that of freshmen in private four-year colleges. The objective of all of these observers is the same, and, as we conjure up visions of curriculum reform, we must take seriously their plea that ways be found to close the gap between the two- and the four-year colleges in order to facilitate the transition from one to the other.[13]

Unfortunately, the desirability of increasing transfer opportunities for two-year college students may compel us to be wary of interdisciplinary courses. Non-traditional academic institutions are natural settings for non-traditional, innovative, integrative curricula. Moreover, the credits crunch makes such courses especially inviting because they promise to accomplish so much so efficiently. Aside from the problems of retraining a highly specialized faculty and integrating disparate themes or disciplines into a cohesive whole, the major problem with interdisciplinary courses is that they do not transfer well. Good intentions notwithstanding, we may cause our students to repeat courses or to take extra credits in order to complete the BA. Whether or not we approve of them, we probably should be realistic about the constraints of the transfer function. The two-year colleges do answer to the four-year colleges if they seriously believe that students should have the option to transfer

now or later. This is after all, a vital part of the two-year college's role as a "middleman" in higher education.[14]

At the same time, the current movement for curricular reform will probably fail if it simply tries to restore the transfer function to its former glory as THE collegiate function. Vocational education is here to stay and it would be best for the liberal arts and science faculty to learn to live with it. Actually that may not be such a difficult task because faculties in career programs tend to be sensitive to market realities and employers themselves are calling for more balanced education. While they continue to value technical skills, punctuality, neatness and industriousness, employers also realize that today's workers have to be able to adapt to changing technologies, to deal with people, to solve problems, and to make decisions. Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that in the post-industrial economy, workers will have to change jobs several times in their life span and will need to be as flexible and as broadly based as possible in order to meet that challenge.

At present, the two-year colleges have four major missions: what Cohen and Brauer labeled the three C's, compensatory, career, and community, plus the collegiate or transfer function, which makes four C's. These objectives are all subsumed under the umbrella commitment to access but all too frequently they are pursued in isolation from each other, if not in an atmosphere of competition and defensiveness. The basic skills faculty often feel that they do not belong in the departmental structure and

that they are looked down upon as glorified high school. The vocational faculty are often at odds with other faculty for credits and resources and sense that they too are not quite considered college caliber. The community outreach programs are non-credit and therefore also appear less than legitimate in a college context. Ironically, only the liberal arts and science faculties are secure in terms of their college role but they are insecure about their place in the current curriculum and are sometimes resentful of their displacement by other, more pragmatic priorities.

The challenge that the two-year colleges face in the 1990's is to turn these conflicts into cohesiveness, not only to resolve their internal tensions but also to improve their external image. The liberal arts and sciences are well situated to be the tie that binds because of their longstanding centrality to the culture of higher education. On the one hand, they are flexible enough and universal enough to serve all purposes. On the other hand, they are significant enought to ensure that all students obtain, as Boyer put it, "conscience as well as "competence."[15]

In sum, it is first of all crucial that liberal arts and science courses be used to examine the class, race, ethnicity, gender and urban issues that will play such a pivotal role in shaping the students' futures. Secondly, it is desirable that liberal arts and science content be used in compensatory courses to enrich and enliven the mastery of skills while preparing students for introductory college-level courses. Thirdly, liberal arts and science courses should be better integrated into business programs in order to break down the perceived dichotomy

between the two curricula and in order to enhance the career students' ability to transfer. Fourthly, the liberal arts and sciences can offer a lively basis for events that will enhance the academic quality of life for the commuting student as well as provide a wealth of opportunity for outreach to the community. In all areas, the liberal arts and sciences will continue to derive their validity from their ability to raise fundamental human questions and to offer everyone the opportunity to wrestle with the answers to those questions. They will survive and be revitalized only if they draw upon their most vital, most humanistic traditions and, therefore, succeed in demonstrating their eternal relevance to the human struggle.

As the concept of terminal education becomes increasingly anachronistic; as the realities of working in a post-industrial society demand an increasingly flexible workforce; as the attrition rates in two-year colleges remain increasingly high; as the needs of the community become increasingly profound, educators are turning to the liberal arts and sciences for help. It is incumbent upon those faculties to respond to the call in a spirit of collegiality, not of superiority. They themselves must lead the way in showing how traditional subjects of study can serve non-traditional students in non-traditional institutions that so much want to be a legitimate part of the mainstream of higher education. Most importantly, they must insist on using their disciplines to extend opportunities for social mobility and personal development even, or rather particularly, for students who need remediation, who want careers, and who dream of equality.

Footnotes

1 Arthur M. Cohen and Florence M. Brauer, The American Community College (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1982), 4, 23.

2 Frederick Rudolph, The American College and Unviersity: A History. (New York: Vintage, 1965), 463; Cohen and Brauer (1982) 8, 13; Tyrus Hillway, The American Two-Year College (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 56-57; The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, The Open-Door Colleges: Policies for Community Colleges (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970), 11; Charles R. Monroe, Profile of the Community College: A Handbook (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1972), 1, 7-8.

3 George B. Vaughan, "President Truman Endorsed Community College Manifest," Community and Junior College Journal (April, 1983), 21-24; Carnegie Commission (1970), 11; L. Stephen Zwerling, "Reducing Attrition at the Two-Year Colleges," Community College Review (Fall, 1980), 56; Stanley Aronowitz, False Promises (New York: McGraw Hill, 1973).

4 Carnegie Commission (1970), 10-13; Cohen and Brauer (1982), xvi; William M. Birenbaum, "From Mass to Class in Higher Education," in L. Stephen Zwerling, ed., The Community College and its Critics; New Directions for Community Colleges Series (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1986), 7.

5 Jerome Karabel, "Community Colleges and Social Stratification in the 1980's" in Zwerling, ed. (1986), 14; Cohen and B. Brauer (1982), 40; Alexander W. Astin, Minorities in Higher Education (San Francisco; Jossey Bass, 1982) 139-141; New York Times, March 20, 1988, 28; Fred L. Pincus, "The False Promises of Community Colleges; Class Conflict and Vocational Education," Harvard Educational Review L (August, 1980), 354.

6 Carnegie Commission (1970), 9; Maurice R. Berube, The Urban University in America (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978), 18, 33-34.

7 Cohen and Brauer (1982), 12; Berube (1978), 45-47.

8 Monroe (1972), 6, 16, 17; Ira Shor, Culture Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration, 1969-1984 (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), ch. 2.

9 Ernest L. Boyer, College: The Undergraduate Experience in America (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 102-111; Cohen and Brauer (1982), 204-207.

10 Pincus (1980), 338-39, 345; Karabel in Zwerling, ed., (1986), 14, 20-222; Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, "Higher Education as a Social Sieve," in James M. Henslin, Down to Earth Sociology (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 218-19; L. Stephen Zwerling, Second Best: The Crisis of the Community College (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976), 19-26; Aronowitz (1973); Shor (1986).

11 Cohen and Brauer (1982), 286-87; K. Patricia Cross, "Thirty Years Have Passed: Trends in General Education," in B. Lamar Johnson, ed., General Education in Two-Year Colleges. New Directions for Community Colleges Series (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1982), 11.

12 Jack Friedlander, "An Eric Review: Why is Transfer Education Declining?" Community College Review (Fall, 1980), 59; Alison Bernstein, "The Devaluation of Transfer: Current Explanations and Possible Causes," in Zwerling, ed. (1986), 31, 32, 36.

13 Richard C. Richardson, Jr. and Louis W. Bender, Fostering Minority Access and Achievement in Higher Education: The Role of Urban Community Colleges and Universities (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1987), 3, 58, 59, 208; Astin (1982), 191.

14 Frederick C. Kintzer, Middleman in Higher Education (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1973), 1-2.

15 Boyer (1987), 111.

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